

Denman's Col (Geometry): Mary Mary Lucier
Marita Sturken

Afterimage 9, 7 (February 1982)

Mary Lucier's latest installation, *Denman's Col (Geometry)*, shown at the Whitney Museum in November, is a visual adventure of architecture, form, scale and urban territory—a romantic and sensuous dialogue of city imagery and sounds which Lucier juxtaposes with drinking glasses and interior props. "The piece is a personal evocation of certain life states," says Lucier, "through analogies to the world of functional shapes, large and small—those which we inhabit and those which we can physically hold."

The installation consists of two synchronous channels of video displayed on five monitors. The monitors are mounted in a jagged sculptural framework representing the architectural skyline of the city. The screens, as in *Planet*, ranged from 12 in. to 21 in. in size, but this time were placed in an erratically rotated fashion—as if a monitor had rolled in the wind and been arrested at random stages of motion. Since several of the screens are upside down or sideways, giving the effect of looking at different images, this two-channel piece has the appearance of a five-channel work.

From the first moment of *Denman's Col*, the abstraction of the cityscape is established. Lucier begins with a view of the Manhattan skyline; she then moves to fragments of the buildings against the sky, and the sun moving forward from behind a watertower, its white light enveloping the dark structure. The ambiguity of negative-positive space which she creates in these cropped building sections transforms the blue sky into various images: a series of steps, a serrated leaf, or a geometric shape filled with clouds. The buildings of *Denman's Col* are posed, animate, ever-watching structures; they are the emblems and sole inhabitants of the metropolis. In this piece, people are only glimpsed—gliding by in slow motion under an umbrella or as the hands which orchestrate the movement and replenishment of the glasses.

To Lucier, the title of the installation represents both a metaphor for her past and an intellectual negotiation of urban landscape. ("Denman" is a family name, a "col" is a pathway between two mountains.) The title also implies an investigation that is almost geological. In an early and central shot, a wire glass appears between two buildings, an urban col. We hear the squeak of a bottle being uncorked and see the glass fill with wine. The camera then changes focus so that the buildings are realized in the reflective curve of the glass, contained in its fisheye perspective. "Filled with beverage," says Lucier, "the vessel becomes poetic, creating a habitation that lies somewhere between real landscape and fantasy. If the buildings are in the drinking glass, they can be held in your hand and in some sense ingested. Conversely, the glass of wine becomes grand in its capacity to contain a city block."

Lucier's juxtaposition of functional architectural shapes with the sensuality of the reflective glass surfaces forms the central thread of the installation. The rotation of the monitors not only alters the effect of watching five screens at once, but emphasizes a pull of gravity away from sky and camera. The lens traces the buildings' long lines, panning dramatically up their forms to the sky. In the realm of the coolly-lit glassware, this movement is correlated with shots of a tall glass being filled with foamy beer. The stream of liquid (seen pouring both upwards and downwards) evokes the tall, sinewy buildings. When we see both these movements simultaneously upside down and right side up, they converge as if some magnetic force were sucking them toward its center.

These playful redefinitions of scale and gravity are taken further as martini glasses are juxtaposed with spiralled buildings, champagne glasses are paired with art deco styles, a coffee cup with a squat brown building. The

glasses are so elegant and so romantically photographed that they look like advertisements. The buildings, seen through park trees or placed starkly against the metallic, blue sky, are presented in the antithesis of that artificial light. Lucier sees the two structures-that of the glassware and that of the architecture-as evocative of moods and thought. "In the city one spends endless time gazing out of windows at buildings. Their outlines, niches, arches, ornaments and ledges both feed and receive the dreams of millions of people The drink is also a focus of contemplation Through the beverage, we divine our fates, derive our values and makeup stories about yesterday and tomorrow."

While presenting these sensuous, romantic environments, Lucier is ultimately removing the architecture and glass structures from their contexts and their gravitational centers and re-establishing them within a new context, one that combines and interrelates their functional elements. She establishes a specific urban landscape and then reorients the viewer within that space. Distinct, selective sounds highlight the visuals: a distant police siren, that birdcall of the city, opens the tape's soundscape; the remote squeak of a clothesline, church bells, soft rain and wind combine throughout to create a complex audio environment. For contrast, Lucier inserts a less formal moving shot in which a pan by buildings from a car is coupled with a roar of city noise that sounds like it is being played backwards. In the interior scenes, the crisp sound of liquid pouring into a glass, the squeak of a cork, and the soft noise of flowers being dropped are sounds appropriate to the clean lighting of the glasses.

As the sun is revealed as an element in Lucier's tightly constructed urbanscape, the high-pitched sound of a hand spinning on the rim of a glass of liquid begins to fill the soundtrack. Both elements eventually obliterate their environments: the sunlight pouring through the city structures and the light reflecting off a wineglass stream into the lens and bleach out all visible imagery; at the same time the sound becomes one flute-like note spinning outward. This final eradication is the reaffirmation of Lucier's presence as the orchestrator of these interiors and exteriors. The hand which pours the liquid into glasses and scans the architectural structures is, finally, opening the lens to the sun and wiping out the neatly contained environment it has created.